

CONVERSION

Acts 9.3-6

Last week we began looking into the conversion and the call of Paul, the Apostle. I know many of you were helping with VBS and were not able to hear the first sermon in this short series. I told those who were here that it would take at least two Sundays and maybe three to get through this part of Acts.

Last week, the sermon was entitled “Preparation.” The purpose of the sermon was to review the life of Paul before his conversion and to see how God brought all the elements of his life together on the road to Damascus where he was saved.

The week before, we looked at the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch through the witness of Philip the Evangelist on the road that goes south from Jerusalem to Gaza.

Paul was converted on a road also, but his experience took place on a road that ran north from Jerusalem to Damascus.

At first glance, there may not seem to be any correlation between these two events, but here is the point that I think God intended for us to see by having Luke tell the stories back to back.

God determined the men who would be saved, the time, the place, and the method of their conversion. That is because God is sovereign in salvation. Conversion is the work of God and it cannot happen apart from His sovereign will. Jesus made it very clear...

John 6:44 No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him... 6.65 No one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.

Saul did not happen to be on this road to Damascus. He did not just happen to meet Christ there. It was the culmination of a lifetime of events that brought him to this place.

Everything about his life – his birth, his education, his religious training, his experience as a Pharisee – all contributed to what happened on the road that day.

The Greco-Roman culture into which he was born, his strict Jewish upbringing, the character of the Jewish religion, and the emphasis on the Law...all of these things were influential in making Saul into the man that he was at the time of his conversion.

Today, the sermon is entitled “Conversion” as we give a more detailed look into Saul’s salvation experience.

Acts 9.1-4a

Saul was an angry man and, driven by his passion for the Law, was determined to stamp out this movement of “the Way” – the growth of the church that had been so remarkable and could not be ignored – and to destroy anyone who claimed that Jesus was the Messiah.

Now he had arrest warrants from the high priest and the Sanhedrin that authorized him to travel 135 miles north to Damascus to continue his work there.

In his passion, he pressed his entourage onward across the desert track toward Damascus even during the middle of the day when most travelers would have sought rest in the shade of a tent or an oasis.

But Saul was on a mission and was determined to get to Damascus at the earliest possible moment.

Then suddenly – at least suddenly for these travelers, though not for God, for He works in His own perfect timing – around noontime when the sun was at its peak, Saul and his companions were struck down on the road – laid out prostrate in the sand, not by the sun, but by the Light of Heaven.

Verse 4

This verse verifies three things for us:

1. God knew Saul's location
2. God knew Saul's name
3. God knew Saul's works

Saul may have not have known much about Christ, but Christ knew everything about Saul.

At first, Saul had no idea what had just happened to him. He saw a blinding light and heard a booming voice which spoke very clearly to him in his own language.

Those who were with him also fell, but seemed to have regained their feet and stood in awe of what was happening. They heard the sound as if someone was speaking, but they could not understand the words.

This indicates that Jesus had intended the words to be effective only in the heart of Saul. As we saw in the story of the Ethiopian eunuch, Christ had come to this particular road at this particular time to save this particular man. As far as the biblical record goes, no other person was saved that day on the road to Damascus.

Verse 5

Saul: *Who are you, Lord?*

The word “lord” here is the Greek word *kurios*, which, in this statement of Saul, was most likely a simple reference of respect. It was obvious to Saul that he had encountered something and Someone bigger than himself.

Jesus (speaking in Hebrew per Acts 26.14): *I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.*

Saul was not just persecuting people; he was persecuting the church. And who is the church? The church is the incarnation of Christ on earth similar to the way that Jesus was an incarnation of God the Father here on earth. The church is the body of Christ.

1 Cor. 12:27 *Now you are the body of Christ.*

Eph. 4:11 *And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, 12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ,*

Christ dwells in the hearts of His people in the person of the Holy Spirit; therefore, any attack on the church is actually an attack on Christ himself.

Matt. 10:40 He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me.

Luke 10:16 He who hears you hears Me, he who rejects you rejects Me, and he who rejects Me rejects Him who sent Me.

John 13:20 Most assuredly, I say to you, he who receives whomever I send receives Me; and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me.

Saul had not only attacked the church of God. He had attacked God himself.

And now Jesus offers a graceful rebuke of sorts towards Saul in the form of His shortest parable.

Jesus: *It is hard for you to kick against the goad.*

If you have any translation other than a KJV or NKJV, these words are probably not recorded in your Bible in verse 5. I do not know exactly why, but it really does not matter, because Paul himself included the words in his testimony before King Agrippa in Acts 26.14.

I know that I touched on this last week, but many of you were not in here and there is more that I think we need to point out about this phrase.

Last week, I told you that this phrase is evidence for the fact that this was not a momentary or spontaneous event, but that God had had it in the works since before the foundation of the world.

In fact, after his conversion, Paul realized that God had called him to salvation and to the ministry from the time he was conceived, similar to the call of God on the life of Jeremiah.

Gal. 1.15 When he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, 16 was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone. (ESV)

Between that time and this day, how many times had God spoken to Saul? Saul had lived in Jerusalem since he was a young boy.

- It could be that Saul heard Jesus' teaching
- May have heard sermons by Peter and John
- May have been present during the trials of the Apostles
- Almost certain he heard the testimony of Stephen
- The resurrection was a fact that none of the Jewish leadership had an answer for because one thing was certain – the tomb was empty.

Saul was an intelligent man and he knew the Law and the Prophets as well as any man alive. Could it be that the events of the last three years were playing on his mind and his soul?

The idea that Jesus could be the Messiah was very offensive to Saul. After all, the Bible said in Deut. 31.23, that anyone hanged on a tree was cursed by God. Jesus was hanged on a cross, so He cannot be the Messiah.

Yet the call of God was even stronger on his soul. This struggle between the traditions of his religion and the call of God may have created such conflict of soul that he openly rebelled by attacking the very evidence that was causing him such conviction.

God had been working on Saul for a long time, but Saul kept bucking up against the call of God on his life. He continued to “kick against the goad.” He simply would not yield to the call of God.

The goad is an instrument of discipline. To train or break an undisciplined bull, a master would goad him at the point of rebellion. If he kicked, the master would goad him at his heels.

If he balked, the master would goad him in his backside. If he turned to the left or to the right, the master may goad him in the shoulder or even use the shaft as a whip to strike the bull.

The goad may seem to be a cruel instrument, but the goal of the master is to train the ox to respond to his words. He has no plans

to return to the goad unless his words cease to have the effect of obedience.

When words do not have the desired effect, he uses wounds – but that is not his first choice.

Alfred Barnes

The expression, “to kick against the prick,” or the goad, is derived from the action of a stubborn and unyielding ox, kicking against the goad.

And as the ox would injure no one by it but himself – as he would gain nothing – it comes to denote an obstinate and refractory (stubborn, disobedient) disposition and course of conduct, opposing motives to good conduct; resisting the authority of Him who has a right to command; and opposing the leadings of Providence, to the injury of him who makes the resistance.

It denotes rebellion against lawful authority, and thus getting into greater difficulty by attempting to oppose the commands to duty.

All of this is certainly true of Saul. If only he had listened to his teacher.

Do you remember the warning of Gamaliel to the Sanhedrin during the trial of the twelve Apostles?

Acts 5:38 And now I say to you, keep away from these men and let them alone; for if this plan or this work is of men, it will come to nothing; 39 but if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it – lest you even be found to fight against God.

In his rebellion against the call of God, it is very likely that Saul even believed he was carrying out the will of God in his persecution of the church. Jesus had warned His disciples that there would be people like this.

John 16:2 They will put you out of the synagogues; yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service. 3 And these things they will do to you because they have not known the Father nor Me.

ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

It is hard work to domesticate an undisciplined bull like Saul. Using his goad, the master seems to punch, to prick, even to beat the ox without mercy in order to mold it to the task, yet it is mercy which drives the master to his work.

He has a work which must be completed and the ox, one trained and disciplined to the yoke, is more fit than any other animal for the task. For all the discipline is not for the sake of the ox, but for the glory of the master.

There are fields to plant and stumps to be removed and hard work to be done – work suited to the nature of the ox.

The ox is undisciplined at first – goring everyone else in the barnyard. But the master loves His possession, and His will is stronger and He is more determined. He will bring this wild bull to harness as a cooperating, disciplined, productive ox.

The price the master paid for the ox was too high not to bring him under his authority. “I have treasured you since you first calved, and I have purchased you at such an exorbitant price so that I might bend you to my task.”

It is true of the price God paid for the soul of Saul and for the souls of all of the redeemed.

1 Cor. 7:23 *You were bought at a price...*

1 Pet. 1:18 *You were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold... 19 but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot.*

Gal. 3:13 *Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us...*

Heb. 9:12 *Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption.*

As his possession, the master nurtures the ox – secures barns and abundant hay and water and treatment of disease and protection from the elements and predators – but all for the sake of the work to be done.

ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

You see, God did not save Saul just for Saul's sake. He saved him because he was perfectly suited to a specific task that God desired His church to accomplish – that of carrying the Gospel message to the nations.

You will notice that Jesus did not say to Saul, “It is hard on me to tolerate your continuous rebellion.” Nor did He say, “It is hard on the church to experience your persecution.”

What Jesus did say to Saul is “It is hard for you to kick against the pricks of the goad.”

Saul was hurting the cause of Christ but at a price he could not afford to pay.

It is hard on the ox to kick back when he is goaded by the master.

It is also hard on us when we refuse to listen to the call of the Holy Spirit on our hearts to yield to Christ for salvation or for service in the church and the kingdom

Verse 6a

This time when Saul used the term lord, there is little doubt that he was addressing Jesus as his Savior and acknowledging Him as Lord of his life.

This response by Saul is evidence also of the presence of the Holy Spirit in this event because...

1 Cor. 12:3 *No one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit.*

Saul: *Lord, what will you have me to do?*

Once Saul lay in the dust of the road and realize who it was that had struck him down, as soon as he yielded his will to that of Christ, he discovered that what Jesus had said during His earthly ministry was true.

Matt. 11:29 *Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me... 30 For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.*

Charles Spurgeon

When man once gives his heart to his Master – when once this brutish heart is conquered by Divine Grace and becomes a servant of God – of what use he is! Do you see the labor and zeal of Paul? Why, he never grew weary! He was an ox that never fretted under the yoke. He went to the end of many a long furrow and back again, and to the end again. No stripes hindered him. No prisons stopped him. He was not afraid of death itself! He crossed the boisterous sea – no mean feat in those days of unskilled navigation. He traversed the equally dangerous land, suffering perils from robbers, from rivers, from wild beasts, and from false brethren.

Like a strong ox he plowed a heavy soil from morning to evening without complaint. He left no work undone, but he could say at the close of his career, “I have fought a good fight. I have finished my course. I have kept the faith!” Oh, what a vast amount of good might be done by some of those who are now doing so much mischief!

When we go back to these verses, we note that it is a very short step in verse 4 from Saul to Soul. And it is a very short step in verse 5 from goad to God.

So that we might read those verses to say to us this morning. “Soul, Soul why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the God who loves you.”

Saul: *Lord, what will you have me to do?*

Will you let that be your response to the call of God on your heart this morning? Then you will be able to sing with the Psalmist...

Psalm 73

21 When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, 22 I was brutish and ignorant; I was like a beast toward you. 23 Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. 24 You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory. 25 Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. (ESV)